



At Land: Bodyscape & Cityscape Marina Ballo Charmet Curated by Jean-François Chevrier 11/20/2009 - 1/9/2010 Storefront for Art and Architecture



Jean-François Chevrier is an art historian, art critic and exhibition curator. He is Professor in the History of Contemporary Art at the Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Through 30 years, his main centres of interest have been the exchanges between art and literature in the nineteenth century, modern and contemporary art, history of photography, and architecture. In his essays on photography, Chevrier has examined the place of photography within modern art, *between the fine arts and the media*. He published long monographic essays on Raoul Hausmann, Antonin Artaud, Walker Evans, Brassai, Robert Doisneau, Michèlelesto, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Gerhard Richter, Oyvind Fahlström, Marcel Broodthaers, Herzog & de Meuron, Jeff Wall, among others. Exhibitions and catalogues he has curated and co-edited include *Une autre objective / Another Objectivity* (1988-9), *Photo-Kunst* (1989-90), *Walker Evans & Dan Graham* (1992-4), *Des Territoires* (2001), *Art and Utopia: Limited Action, Modern Art according to Mallarmé* (2004-5). He recently published a monograph on Jeff Wall (Paris: Hazan, 2006) and an expanded edition of his 1982 book, *Proust et la photographie* (Paris: L'Archivien, 2009).

The work of photographer and artist Marina Ballo Charmet, whose formal training is as a psychoanalyst, is centered on what she describes as "intuitive, unintentional observation, irrational and without direction." This retrospective exhibition, curated by critic and writer Jean-François Chevrier, presents a selection of photographic and video works produced since 1993 that investigate a variety of subjects ranging from the ordinary and the mundane in the urban landscape to the human figure. Ballo Charmet's work constitutes less an attempt to provide a pictorial rendition of these subjects than an endeavour to evoke the "unperceived" in our daily experiences. Her photographs of the urban landscape concentrate on shreds of the city: details of sidewalks, the upper levels of buildings that pulse in and out of the margins of our field of view; her exploration of the human body concentrates on specific areas such as the area between the breast and the mouth, the first field of view a baby becomes familiar with. The images featured in her Parks series – an ongoing project that has taken her to public parks in Milan, London, Berlin, Paris, Rome, Vienna, Madrid, Lisbon, Palermo and New York – are photographed close to the ground, revealing each park as its own universe. Ballo Charmet's work is less an exercise in representation of her chosen subjects – whether they be details of cities, urban landscapes, portions of the human figure or parkscapes – than an investigation of how we perceive them.

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Photographs and Video by Marina Ballo Charmet
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Photographic realism has been defended and criticized since the 19th century in terms of its relationship of faithfulness to appearances. Nonetheless, there is nothing more free-floating – and ungraspable – than appearances, especially when they are belabored by the transforming power of resemblances. The recording, which operates by way of reduction and miniaturization, allows a fragment taken from an alleged environmental continuum to be caught.

Whence the unbearable idea of a visual performance that relies on predatory practice of instant photography. In truth, Marina Ballo Charmet is involved in the experience of visual touch that precedes the act of apprehending an object identified (designated, named) and sought-after as such. Her way of seeing corresponds to the unfolding of a rough surface and to perception that gropes its way around a mass that envelops. She introduces to the nomenclature of photographic description an approach that is different from the modes of detached knowledge and from the mechanisms of aesthetic appropriation (capture). She is not even looking for the empathic intuition, nor to a corresponding pathos of an image that privileges the apparition, or a rupture of the visible, over the appearance. She is less interested in what is missing or broken in the visual fabric, in the features of discontinuity – which have an epiphanic value in the imaginary of instant photography – than in the swelling and the widening of the physiological field of the image.

The things that make a city – the qualities of a "cityscape" – have disappeared from the images of *Con la coda dell'occhio* (1993-4). What remains are the stony bases of a fragmented urban territory, crumbling or reinforced, irregular, receding, etc. A dog looks through the photographer's lens. It all happens at ground level, on the immediate periphery of the city's most common expanse, on the fringes, as it were, of a commonplace: along the wayside. The recurring figure is

the planted divider strip or traffic island: the farmer's *aiuola* reduced to a landscaping contract, a thirsty stretch of urban vegetation, a "flower bed" aligned on the street. But it also happens along the wayside of vision. The idea of the field (*campo*) has reappeared, far from countryside: a cultivated field, the metaphor of every space or range of activity. In this case, it is a field of perception. An uncertain field, opened alongside the streets that ordinarily define the urban perspective and orient the gaze.

Marina Ballo-Charmet is interested in the wanderings and the eroticism of the eye. She is not seeking to generate or even to arouse visions. She is content to explore the workings of the human gaze and disturbances to perception, without recourse to the striking event or the marvelous association. Her position is akin to Raoul Hausmann's exploration of close-up and peripheral vision. Like him, she challenges the anthropocentrism of an "exact" and supposedly objective vision. One may recall, for example, an observation made by Raoul Hausmann in 1921: "For millennia our eyes have adapted to an optics reflecting our notions of possession and our tendencies to inferiority: we would lose our assurance of an upright posture, of a human standing, if the perspective of high and low, of great and small, did not maintain our consciousness of a natural superiority over the surroundings, through an overcompensation of vision."

In parks, as well as in the street, Marina moves at land, to quote the first film of Maya Deren (1944), considered by Adam Sitney as the prototype of the "trance film." She makes her way as one would sail, through cities and parks, among bodies, giving her pictures an oceanic and kinematic dimension.

In *Primo campo* (2001-3), each plane is a cross-section in the duration of an active gaze that is moving, is moved, trembles and is startled like gooseflesh at the surface of the body as observed. This cinematic treatment of the still image owes a great deal to the video experiment conducted by Marina Ballo since the publication of *Con la coda dell'occhio*. We should nevertheless be careful not to repeat the widespread

confusion between still and frozen images. The images collected in *Primo campo* have not been frozen in a flow of a filmic continuity. Each image is the result of a photographic session that shares with the process involved in film-making only the experience of the mobility of the gaze within a given field or plane - *primo campo*.

While the close-up photographic image is all too often a way of concentrating a subject, magnifying a fragment or detail of the visible world (according to the New Objectivity) or, on the contrary, exalting a fascination with the formless (according to the Surrealists, Boiffard, "Le gros orteil" [The big toe]). In Marina Ballo's *Primo campo* photographs, the gaze tends to forget such fetishism of the subject and seizes on itself as the main thrust of the visual experience. At every instant, the photographed body loses its spatial coordinates and seems to melt into the light like a piece of stretched skin or an embossed surface when flattened and smoothed. Blurred areas contrasting with the wrinkles and roughnesses of the epidermis represent the wave, the acceleration of the gaze as it slides, loses grip, and melts, rushes to melt, into the perceptual field. It is here that we see revealed the logic of perception that takes itself as its object.

Can one really talk in terms of observation and composition when the object is so close that the activity of the spectator's gaze is more like a sculptor's modelling? Marina Ballo does not "put" things next to each other; she does juxtapose blurred and sharp areas. Modelling and modulation are the most appropriate words to describe the tactile character of the gaze. The image changes content, the human gaze no longer grasps its subject at a distance but becomes a channel for contact and involvement that is psychic as much as it is physiological.

About Storefront

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Storefront for Art and Architecture

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